with a decent happiness

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with a decent happiness

by torigates

Summary

Tony Stark is Iron Man. Steve Rogers isn't, and never was Captain America.

Or, the one where everything is the same except Steve is a kindergarten teacher.

Notes

This takes place in a weird, nebulous AU where Steve was born sixty years later and became a kindergarten teacher instead of Captain America. In terms of Iron Man timeline, most things in Iron Man and Iron Man 2 are the same, and this fic takes place sometime after that. IDK IDK it seemed like a good idea at the time. Credit for the original idea must go to dudski.

The first thing Steve noticed were the feet.

Sticking out of a bush some several hundred yards ahead of him was a pair of feet attached to some legs. Steve had a sickening moment where he worried he was going to come across a dead body before they jerked violently. He was too far away to hear anything, but he rather suspected if he could, he'd hear retching.

Great.

He sped up his pace a little. Just because he had no desire to help someone being violently ill on the side of the road didn't mean he wouldn't. He would definitely help. That was just good manners, after all.

The sky was a pale grey-blue. It had to be half-past six by now, and Steve was out on his usual early morning jog. He always went out first thing, weather permitting. Usually, this was his favourite time to run, early April, and he could get in five or six miles easily. It was warm enough that his breath no longer came in cloudy gasps, burning his lungs as he ran.

As Steve got closer, his earlier suspicions were confirmed, and he heard the sound of vomiting. Wasn't that just the way he wanted to spend his morning? It served him right, he supposed. He had yesterday been bragging it had been months since someone threw up in his classroom.

Luckily, this wasn't in his class. When Steve looked around he cringed as he realised it was just outside of it. And on the daffodils his students had planted last year.

Great.

"Are you okay?" Steve called out, biting down his irritation. He came to a stop beside the feet.

There was no response.

"Hey," he tried a second time. "Are you all right? Do you need me to call for help?"

The feet didn't move for another long moment, and Steve was about to step into the bushes to see for himself if this guy was still breathing, when he heard a long groan, and the feet started to move once more.

"Are you okay?" he asked again.

The feet moved out of the bushes and revealed themselves to be attached to a man. His dark hair was dishevelled, and his goatee was almost completely overgrown by his five o'clock shadow. He was wearing what was probably a suit at one time, but now was just black pants and an untucked dress shirt, which also happened to be misbuttoned.
He stood and staggered.

"Shit," he said. "Where the fuck am I?"

“East 89th St,” Steve said.

“Fuck,” he said again. “I’m in fucking *Brooklyn*? How did that happen?” He looked like he actually expected Steve to supply an answer.

Steve opened his mouth.

“Nevermind,” the man said. “I’ll just call Happy to come and pick me up. Shit what time is it?”

“About six thirty.” Steve resisted the urge to reach out a hand and steady the man, as he swayed back and forth on the spot.

“Six fucking thirty? No wonder I feel like shit, human beings aren’t meant to be awake this early, unless of course they haven’t been to to bed yet. You look far too rested for this ungodly hour. What did you say your name was?” He snapped his fingers in Steve’s direction, and Steve jerked back a little.

“Well, I didn’t,” he said. “It’s Steve.”

“Steve, right,” he nodded like that wasn’t completely new information, and patted his shirt and pants, looking for something. “Where’s my phone?” he asked. “Did you take my phone?”

“No,” Steve said, torn between bemusement and irritation. “I met you thirty seconds ago.”

The man regarded him coolly for five seconds before seeming to decide Steve was telling the truth. “No, it’s cool,” he said. “I probably lost it, or had it forcibly taken from me. People tend to take things from me. Are you sure you didn’t take it?”

“I’m sure,” Steve said, starting to feel annoyed.

“No, no, it’s cool,” he said. “I’ll just borrow yours.”

Steve crossed his arms over his chest, genuinely annoyed now. “I don’t have one,” he said.

The man gaped. “You don’t have a phone?” he asked. “How is that possible? Were you born in the 1920s?”

Steve scowled. “I *own* a phone,” he said. “I just don’t have it with me.”

“Why not?”

“I *was* out for a run,” he said pointedly.

“And that precludes having a phone with you? It seems a bit careless, really. What if you were to come across someone in an emergency and you didn’t have it with you?”

“Someone who was stranded in Brooklyn, for example?” Steve asked dryly.

“Precisely,” the man said sounding smug. “And don’t remind me I’m in Brooklyn, I’m doing my best to ignore that god awful fact.”

Steve bristled at the insult. “Who are you?” he asked.

“Tony,” he said simply.

“I don’t carry a phone with me on my runs,” Steve said.

Tony looked him up and down, seeming to take in Steve’s sweat soaked shirt, and sweatpants. “I can see that.”

Steve felt his cheeks flood with heat, and opened his mouth to say something, anything.

“It’s fine,” Tony said. “I’ll figure it out. Sorry to have trouble you. I’ll just... find a payphone. Do they even have payphones anymore?” he asked. He stepped out of the bushes and stumbled over the flowers, which Steve could see were being... fertilized by Tony’s vomit.

“Watch out,” he snapped, irritated.

“What?” Tony asked.

“The flowers.”

“The flowers?”

“You’re standing on them,” Steve informed him.

“I am?” he looked down. “I am. And why should I care about these flowers?” he asked.

Steve crossed his arms and frowned. “Besides the fact that this is not your garden, and you did not plant these flowers, and should therefore respect the work of others?” Steve asked. “It happens that my kids planted them, and they mean something to them and to me.”

Tony frowned for a minute. “Your *kids*?” he asked.

Steve waived his hand. “My students,” he said.

Tony looked around, and seemed to notice he was standing in front of a school for the first time. Steve took a second to wonder from where this crazy man who was drunk in front of a Brooklyn school at six in the morning had even come or how he happened to get here.

Tony looked around a little, and swayed on his feet again. Steve frowned again, and sighed. “Okay,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Let’s go?” Tony asked.

“You need a phone,” Steve said. “There’s a phone inside this building. I happen to have keys to the building. Let’s go.”

“Oh,” Tony said. “A landline. Sure. It’s quaint. I can do that.”

Steve rolled his eyes, but didn't say anything. It was a small miracle he had his keys on him in the first place, and he didn't know what he would do if he hadn't remembered to bring them along. Sometimes, when he went for his morning run, he would leave everything at home; phone, keys, wallet, and just allow himself to be caught up in the workout. No outside reminders of his life.

For whatever reason (maybe this reason), Steve hadn't done that today. His keys were in his pocket, and he let the two of them into the building.

Tony pushed ahead, taking in the artwork on the walls. Steve fought back more annoyance, and made sure to close the door firmly behind them. The hallways were dark, with only the early morning light to guide them. Steve could never shake how weird it felt to be in an empty school.

"This way," he said, motioning over his shoulder for Tony to follow. They walked a few steps in silence towards the front office, and Steve savoured the silence. A moment later he was kicking himself.

"I feel like I'm being led to the principal's office," Tony said.

Steve snorted. "Well, you are."

Tony jerked his shoulders. "Story of my life," he muttered under his breath.

"I'm sorry," Steve said. "Is there a problem? Because I'm kind of doing you a favour here."

Tony held up his hands in defeat. "No, no," he said. "After you, fearless leader."

Steve turned to face him, arms crossed over his chest. He opened his mouth to say something, but thought better of it. They were at the front office. He gestured to the phone. "Press 9 for an outside line," he said.

Tony ambled over to the desk and picked up the receiver. He paused.

"Problem?" Steve asked.

Tony shrugged. "I'm not actually sure of the number," he said.

Steve opened his mouth, but Tony waived it off. "No, it's fine. It's fine. I know it," he said. "I'm pretty sure I know it. I'm almost eighty percent sure I know the number." He turned his back, and Steve could hear the muffled sound of the numbers being pressed. A brief pause. "Oh," Tony said after a moment. "Happy, thank god. I need you to come get me." Pause. "Brooklyn... No, I don't know. And where were you last night anyway? Don't I pay you to make sure I get home safe?" Pause again. "A likely story... No it's fine. Just come get me... Yeah, Brooklyn... No, I know... I *know*... Trust me, I know."

Against his will, Steve felt his irritation rise while listening to the one sided conversation. Steve knew he shouldn't let it get to him, the casual way Tony spoke about his wealth, his careless disregard for strangers and employees alike. Steve knew he shouldn't let these things

get to him. Tony was a stranger, and once he was gone, Steve would, in all likelihood, never see him again. Rationally, Steve knew this.

The problem was, Steve wasn't always good at listening to his rational side. Especially where a bully was concerned, and Tony had bully written all over him, from the way he spoke to the careless ease with which he carried himself. Everything about him screamed, *I am privileged and not afraid to take advantage of that*. It got Steve's back up in the worst possible way.

Tony snapped his fingers in Steve's direction, one hand over the phone's mouthpiece. Steve bristled. "Where are we exactly?" he asked. "Besides *Brooklyn*." He said Brooklyn like it was a four letter word, and Steve felt his anger rise at that too.

Steve gave him the address tersely.

Tony repeated it back into the phone. "Thanks, Happy," he said. "You're the best.... Yeah... Yeah... Yeah, no shit. Okay, see you in ten... Bye."

He hung up the phone and turned back to Steve. "What's your problem?" he asked.

Steve furrowed his brow. "My problem?" he asked.

Tony gestured at his torso. "What's with the bodyguard stance? You think I'm about to mug you are something?"

Steve raised an eyebrow. "That is extremely unlikely," he said, not able to help the smirk that coloured his voice.

"Was that a jab?" Tony asked. "That sounded like a jab. Were you making a jab at my manly prowess?" he asked.

Steve rolled his eyes. "Let's go," he said, instead of responding. He turned and walked out of the office, forcing Tony to trail after him.

"No, seriously," he said. "I want to know. What was that supposed to mean? And what *is* your problem?"

"I don't have a problem," Steve said.

"I see," Tony said. "So you're just normally an asshole to complete strangers. Good to know."

Steve took a deep breath. And another one. There were at the door. He should let them out, and let Tony go on his way. He should rise about Tony's bait, and finish his run, go home, take a shower, before coming back and teaching his kids. That was what he should do, and Steve knew it.

Instead he whirled around to face Tony. "Excuse me?" he asked. "An asshole? *I'm* the asshole?" Tony nodded and smirked, and that was it. The end of Steve's rope. He threw up his hands. "*You're* the one who was passed out in front of an elementary school, vomited on the front lawn, and accused the person trying to help you of stealing your cell phone!"

Tony looked at him, and opened his mouth to reply.

“I did not take your cell phone!” Steve snapped.

Tony took this in stride. “I’m sorry about the flowers,” he said. “I really am. I realise they’re special, and precious, and I don’t know, *magical*, or what the fuck ever, but you seriously need to relax for a second because they’re *just flowers*.”

Steve knew they were just flowers. They were just flowers, and on top of that, they were flowers planted outside of a school, where kids walked by them every day, and threw garbage on them, spat on them, and a million other disgusting things that only kids could come up with. Steve, having caught multiple students doing many of those things on many occasions was aware that the flowers had been through worse than Tony’s vomit. And the flowers weren’t even his original point, but rather an example of it: that Tony had no respect for other people and his surroundings. Steve knew that he should calmly, and rationally explain this, or even better, let it go completely.

That wasn’t what he did.

“They’re not just flowers,” he said. “They’re a symptom of your narcissism, and selfishness.”

Tony laughed. “That’s rich,” he said. “That’s fucking rich, and what are you, a fucking boy scout? You’ve earned your good samaritan badge, you can report back to Brown Owl, and let them know the virtue of the fucking flowers has been upheld.” He pushed past Steve, and marched to the curb.

Steve closed the door behind him and locked it. He took another deep breath, before following after Tony. He should have just gone in the other direction, but for all Steve knew Tony would get himself murdered as soon as Steve turned his back, and then he’d have to feel guilty on top of being angry.

“Why are you following me?” Tony demanded when Steve was at his side.

“Just making sure you get off safely,” Steve snapped.

Tony snorted. “Of course.”

“When I start something, I see it through,” Steve said through clenched teeth.

Tony opened his mouth to reply, but was saved by the sudden appearance of a sleek, black SUV. The front window rolled down, and a man with dark curly hair and a round face smiled at the two of them. “Hiya, boss,” he said.

“Happy, thank fucking god,” Tony said, reaching for the back door. “No, don’t get out, it’s fine, it’s fine, I just want to get the fuck out of Brooklyn, and get some coffee in me.”

He opened the door and hopped in, slamming it in Steve’s face. Steve squared his shoulders and turned to go. “You’re welcome,” he muttered under his breath.

The car sped off, and Steve rolled his shoulders a few times, letting go of the tension. Then he ran the rest of the way home.

That was the end of that.

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Steve strolled into school at ten to eight the next morning, energized. He had a great run, and he was excited about his lesson plan for the day. It was water day, and even though all the other teachers thought he was crazy for enjoying water day, and even though his entire classroom and person always ended up completely soaked, Steve couldn't help it. He loved how excited the kids got playing with water, and he loved seeing them happy and enjoying themselves. It was fun.

"Hey Steve."

He turned at the sound of his name. Bethany, the school secretary was poking her head out of the office. She had worked at the school for over twenty years, and the best part was, she adored Steve. She always helped him get his hands on the best supplies for his classroom.

"Morning," Steve greeted.

"I have something for you," she said with a grin.

Puzzled, Steve followed after her. He didn't remember ordering anything recently, and usually when he did, Bethany just had them sent directly down to his classroom. He opened his mouth to inquire, but before he got any words out, he turned and saw the large floral arrangement perched on the edge of Bethany's desk.

"Um," Steve said.

She grinned. "So," she said, rubbing her hands together. "These came for you this morning."

He stared at the flowers. It was one of the largest bouquets Steve had ever seen outside of a wedding. He tried to say something. "Um," he said.

Bethany laughed, delighted. "Who are they from?" she asked.

Steve wandered closer to look at the card sticking out of the top. He felt absolutely certain that Bethany had already read it for herself, which meant it either didn't say, or there wasn't enough information for her to make an educated guess. But Steve was honestly stumped. He wasn't seeing anyone, he hadn't done any recently volunteer events, and no one he knew had passed away (that he knew of).

He plucked the card out of the top of the arrangement. ‘STARK INDUSTRIES’ was written across the top of the thick, crisp paper. Underneath that, there was a brief handwritten message.

Sorry about the vomit. - Tony

Steve stared at the note for several seconds. He turned it over a couple of times, half expecting for more words to appear, or for it suddenly to make sense. Yet no matter how many times Steve read those four words they continued to not make sense.

“So?” Bethany asked. “Who are the flowers from?”

Steve refrained from dropping his face in his hands, though it was a close thing. “It’s... kind of a long story,” he settled on. “And it doesn’t matter anyway, I have to send these back.”

Bethany took a step in front of the flowers. Steve couldn’t tell whether or not it was done consciously. “Send them back? Steve, this is a two hundred dollar flower arrangement. You can’t just send it back.”

Steve opened and closed his mouth a few times. “Two hundred?” he asked.

She nodded. “Easily. Probably more.”

“Well, all the more reason to send it back. I can’t accept this.”

She stared at him and crossed her arms over her chest. “You’re not sending this back, unless you can give me a perfectly good reason as to why.”

He considered it for a moment, but ultimately decided, *the flowers are from a random guy I don’t even know who vomited in the plants outside the building* would probably not go over well with Bethany. Or it would go over *too* well, and he’d be forced to explain the whole sad affair in more detail than he was willing to go into. Eventually he threw up his hands. “Okay fine,” he said. “The flowers stay. You keep them.”

She put up a few token protests, but Steve could tell by the way she was practically petting the vase that she wanted them. He grabbed the few items in his mailbox, and walked out of the office, with a quick wave over his shoulder.

It wasn’t until he was halfway down the hall that he realised he was still holding the card that had been tucked in with the flowers. He considered it for another brief moment before putting it in his pocket.

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The flowers sat on Bethany’s desk for a week, and every time Steve walked past the office, or had to pick up his mail, or escort the kids he caught fighting in the hallway, they were there.

As a reminder. It was irritating, and every time Steve saw those flowers he was reminded of Tony, and how much of a jerk he had been, and how Steve lost his temper, and how *Tony had gotten the last word.*

Steve knew he should let it go. He knew he should just forget about the random stranger he had caught puking on the front steps of the school, he knew he shouldn't let the things that Tony said bother him, and most of all, he knew that he shouldn't be worried about *thanking* Tony for sending the flowers.

But he was. That was the worst part. Steve knew he should send Tony a thank you for the flowers, or at least acknowledge them in some way, and every time he looked at the arrangement he was reminded of the slight, and even though it *shouldn't* bother him, he couldn't help it.

His mom had raised him better than that.

By the end of the week, Steve couldn't take it anymore. His pants were thrown into his laundry hamper earlier in the week. Steve fished the card out of the pocket. He stared at it again, hoping it would bring him more clarity than the first several times he had looked at it. Tony's words were just as perplexing as they'd always been: *Sorry about the vomit - Tony*. It's the top of the card that draws Steve's attention this time. STARK INDUSTRIES is still at the top in bold black letters, and underneath two phone numbers and a downtown address.

Steve paced back and force across his bedroom for several minutes before pulling out his cell phone and dialing the first number listed. It rang once and went to an automated voice system for Stark Industries. Steve listened to the different options before hanging up. All he had was Tony's first name. He wasn't going to be able to find him in some kind of generic company directory. At least not over the phone.

Then he dialed the second number. It rang three times, before Steve heard the click and it rolled over to voicemail. Tony's voice sounded in Steve's ear. *"You've reached the confidential and private voice mail of Tony... seriously, Pepper, do I have to say this shit? And seriously, who is leaving me a message anyway? Everyone knows if they want to get me they have to go through you... Okay, okay, you've reached Tony. Leave a message, but to be honest I will probably never check it."* Click.

Steve pulled the phone away from his ear and stared at it for a minute before disconnecting. Steve sighed and decided to go for a run.

Over the next two days, Steve tried Tony's line six times, and after each call he listened to Tony's ridiculous message all the way through before hanging up.

Steve was frustrated. He wanted to forget about the entire incident, but for whatever reason, it was still hanging over Steve's head, and he couldn't even get ahold of Tony to thank him for the flowers. The fact that he was making it so difficult only infuriated Steve even more.

At this point he had two options: forget about it, or try to track Tony down in person.

No one ever said Steve wasn't stubborn.

After work the following day, Steve made his way downtown. It was easy enough to track down the address on the card. It wasn't until Steve was standing inside the building that he realised what exactly Stark Industries *meant*.

His jaw might have dropped. Just a little.

As Steve looked around, he felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. There was no way he was going to be able to track down one person in an entire skyscraper. He sighed and stuffed his hands into his pockets, turning around once more. He spotted a security guard sitting behind a desk at the back of the lobby, and decided he hadn't come all this way just to give up without asking. The worst that could happen is he'd look like an idiot.

"Hi," he said, once he was standing in front of the guard.

"What can I do for you?" the man asked.

Steve reached into his pocket, and pulled out the original card. "This is going to sound a bit ridiculous, and to be honest, it's a hell of a long shot, but someone--an employee--sent me flowers last week, and I'm just trying to track them down."

He handed over the card. The guard looked down at it for a long time, before finally looking back up at Steve. Then he looked down at the card again. Back up at Steve.

"Are you joking?" he asked.

"No?" Steve said. "I just wanted to thank him."

The guard looked at him for another long moment. "This is from Mr. Stark," he said finally.

"What?" Steve asked.

"This is from Tony Stark," he repeated. "You want me to get Tony Stark down here to meet with you, so that you can thank him for sending you flowers? *Are you out of your mind?*"

Steve was still trying to catch up with the fact that Tony, the man who had been disheveled, unconscious, and vomiting in turns outside Steve's school, with *Tony Stark*, billionaire, genius, playboy, philanthropist.

And, oh yeah, superhero.

"Um," he said.

"What's this?"

The guard sat up a little straighter at the sound of a new voice. Steve half turned to see a remarkably tall, beautiful, red haired woman. She was holding several files, and tapping her toe. It clapped loudly on the granite floor.

The guard actually looked a little worried. "Ms Potts," he said.

“What is this I hear about Mr. Stark?” she asked, raising a perfectly arched eyebrow.

“Nothing, Ms Potts,” he assured her. “Nothing at all. I’m handling it.”

Miss Potts looked over the guard, her eyebrow still arched, before turning her attention to Steve. He actually felt himself blushing a little under her direct gaze, and tried not to squirm.

“Who are you?” she asked.

“Steve Rogers, ma’am,” he said, and held out his hand.

She smoothly transferred all her files into her left hand, and shook his hand with her right. She had a strong firm grip, and Steve watched both her eyebrows raise at his name.

“Steve Rogers?” she asked. “You wouldn’t happen to be the same Steve Rogers who helped Mr. Stark get home last week, would you?”

Steve felt certain his own surprise was reflected on his face. “Um, I suppose I am,” he said. “I was just trying to stop by to thank Tony--Mr. Stark,” he chuckled nervously. “Mr. Stark for the flowers.” He paused. “Maybe you could take him a message?” he ventured.

She got an evil glint in her eye. “Why don’t you come and give him the message yourself?” she asked.

Steve shook his head. “Oh no,” he said. “I wouldn’t want to bother him. I’m sure he’s very busy.”

She reached out, and took him by the elbow. “Nonsense,” she said. “He could use the break, actually. Besides, you came all this way for a reason. I’m sure you don’t actually just want to leave him a note.”

Steve found he couldn’t argue with her logic. Despite the fact that he really didn’t understand it much himself, he *had* taken the time to come down, he wanted to see Tony, to talk to him. He wasn’t expecting to find out that Tony was actually owner and CEO of Stark Industries, and Steve would be lying if he said that didn’t change the way he thought about Tony, at least a little bit.

He followed behind Miss Potts, as she led him to the elevator, and watched as she keyed in a code. The floor moved beneath their feet, and Steve watched the numbers as they descended.

The elevator doors dinged open, and immediately they were bombarded with AC/DC. Steve looked over at Pepper, who only rolled her eyes. She moved forward, and he followed her down the hall. When they came to a glass door, she stopped, and keyed in another code. The door swung open, and the music volume only intensified.

“Jarvis,” she said. “Cut the music.” The music shut off.

Steve looked around, wondering who she was talking to, and tried not stare too much.

Not only was every surface covered with papers and gadgetry, but there were multiple holographic screens projecting various schematics--Steve couldn't decipher what they represented. There were chrips and beeps emitted every few seconds, and somewhere, among all that, Steve could hear Tony's muffled curses.

"Tony?" she called.

There was no answer. She rolled her eyes again, and motioned for Steve to follow her. He watched, as she adeptly navigated the obstacle course that was Tony's workroom, and carefully stepped where she did so as not to disturb anything.

After a moment, Tony came into sight. He was hunched over a table, working with a small soldering iron. There was... Steve stared for a moment, but there was no question about it, there was a large mechanical arm helping him with his work.

"Tony," Pepper said again.

He stopped what he was doing, but didn't look up from his project. "I thought I heard the music go off," he said.

Steve had to bite down the urge to ask how Tony could get any work done with the music as loud as it was, let alone not notice when it had been turned off. That was not the foot he wanted to start this conversation on.

"Look who I found," Pepper said. There was a delighted smirk in her voice.

Tony finally looked up, first at Pepper and then his gaze slid over to where Steve was standing. Suddenly, he felt awkward. He raised a hand in a small wave.

"Hi," Steve said.

"Oh," Tony said. "You're, um, here."

Steve nodded, and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Yeah," he said. "I--"

"I'll let you boys catch up," Pepper said, handing Tony the stack of files she'd been holding. "All of these need to be signed," she said. "*Today*."

"Okay," Tony said. "Fine, whatever."

"Don't 'fine, whatever,' me," Pepper said seriously. "*Sign them*. I'll be back in twenty minutes."

She turned and promptly walked out of the lab before Steve had the chance to say that he didn't need to stay, he had just wanted to thank Tony for the flowers.

"So," Tony said. "You're in my lab."

Steve rubbed the back of his neck awkwardly, and tried to come up with a good reason for why he was there. While he thought, he took a moment to really look at Tony: he was

wearing, old, raggedy jeans that had holes in the knees and were fraying at the cuffs. They were covered in old grease stains, and Steve could see several parallel lines across Tony's thighs where he had obviously wiped his hands several times. He had on a faded black tank top, also with several holes at the straps, and along the sides where the stitching had worn out. Steve could see a faint blue light emitting from Tony's chest through the threadbare fabric, and if there had been any doubt up till this moment, it was now perfectly clear: this was Tony Stark. Iron Man.

"Yeah," Steve said. "I, um, tried calling?"

Tony waved his hand. "Oh yeah, sometimes when I'm down here I get distracted, and lose track of time. I forget to do things like check my messages. Eat. Sleep."

Steve stared at him for several seconds and let Tony's words sink in.

"But I've been calling you for three days!"

Tony shrugged. "Like I said, I get caught up in these things and I lose track of time."

"Are you saying you haven't slept or eaten anything in three days?" Steve asked.

"I think I took a nap somewhere in there. Jarvis, did I take a nap?"

"Sir, you slept for approximately three point five hours forty hours ago," a crisp British voice chimed in.

Steve jumped.

"Oh yeah," Tony said, addressing Steve again. "That's Jarvis. My AI."

"Um," Steve said, then decided to roll with it. "You slept three hours almost two days ago. *Are you insane?*"

"Jury's still out," Tony said. "It's no big deal. I do it all the time."

"Of course it's a big deal. You need to eat. And sleep. Now." He crossed his arms over his chest.

Tony turned to look at him, and Steve could see the fight gearing up behind his eyes. Could practically hear Tony telling Steve that he was an adult, and the owner of a multi-billion dollar company, and a superhero to boot, and that he could damn well do what he pleased, and that no one, Steve especially was going to tell him what to do. Steve could see all those arguments building, and then... Tony just deflated.

"Okay," he said.

"Okay?" Steve asked.

"Okay. Let's go get some food. Are you hungry? Because to be honest, I hadn't noticed it until just this second but I'm actually fucking starving. Like, could eat a whole zebra levels

of starving, might pass out if I don't get some food in me starving."

"Um," Steve said, having trouble keeping up with the change of pace.

"Right," Tony said. "Of course. Food. Let's go." He grabbed a jacket off the back of a chair, and marched towards the door to the lab. Steve had no choice but to follow.

That was how Steve found himself thirty minutes later sitting at a rundown diner in midtown Manhattan at seven o'clock at night. It wasn't the type of place that Steve would have expected Tony Stark, CEO to choose to eat, but sitting across from Tony in his worn out jeans and faded tank top, it didn't seem so out of place.

When the waitress came over to take their order, Steve watched as Tony flirted and charmed his way through her taking their order. Tony ordered a burger and a milkshake. Steve ordered the soup of the day, a hamburger with fries and a salad on the side, and coffee.

Tony stared at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing," Tony said. "I thought I was the one who hadn't eaten in days."

Steve rolled his eyes. "Some of us eat balanced meals. Some of us even remember to eat every day."

Tony waived him off. "Honestly, you sound like Pepper."

Their food arrived surprisingly fast, and Tony dove into his burger with gusto. Steve watched him, amused for several seconds, before starting more slowly on his own food. By the time Tony was done his burger and sucked down half of his milkshake, Steve had managed to put a small dent in his mountain of food. Then he watched as Tony eyed it covetously, before sighing and sliding his plate across the table.

Tony looked guilty for half a second before chowing down.

Once the food was cleared away, Tony turned his gaze on Steve. "So not that I'm knocking this wonderful visit, but did it have a purpose? Or did you just want to see me again? I'm cool either way, but normally people don't just drop by for no reason."

Steve shifted awkwardly in his seat. He had almost hoped Tony wouldn't bring up the reason for his visit, because once he had actually arrived and realised that Tony was *Tony Stark*, it all seemed kind of stupid anyway. Tony probably had Miss Potts send the flowers, he probably hadn't even really remembered who Steve was.

"Well," Steve coughed. "It seems kind of silly now, but I was just trying to thank you for sending me the flowers. You really didn't have to do that. And then you weren't answering your phone, and the address was on the card, and I thought I could just come by, but I didn't really realise... who you were," he trailed off a little at the end.

Tony looked at him for a long moment. “You... just stopped by to thank me,” he said slowly. “Because?”

Steve shrugged. “Well, yeah. I mean, yeah. I felt bad that you had gone to all that trouble, and our secretary said they were expensive flowers, and... I guess it was a bit dumb,” he finished.

“No! No, it wasn’t dumb. Okay, well maybe a little dumb, I mean they were just flowers, and I had kind of ruined the other ones, and I mean money isn’t really an issue.” He gestured to himself as if to say ‘obviously,’ and Steve just stared. “But are you saying you really didn’t know who I was?”

Steve nodded.

“For real?” Tony asked. “I don’t know if you know this about me, but I’m, um, *kind of a big deal*, in the news, oh, and kind of a superhero!”

Steve shrugged again. “Yeah, kind of silly of me, huh?”

Tony laughed, and it was the first time Steve had heard him so open and honest. “A bit silly, yeah,” Tony agreed.

They decided to walk back to Stark Tower rather than calling for Tony’s driver, Happy. Or rather Steve refused to be driven the four blocks back, and while Tony put up a loud and lively protest, Steve could tell he was just going through the motions.

“Did you really not know who I was?” Tony asked after a minute.

Steve held out his hands, helplessly. “No?” he said. “I mean, sorry? I guess I should have realised, I mean obviously you’re in the news all the time for all the amazing things you do with your company, and you’re, well, you’re a hero, obviously.” He trailed off helplessly at the end.

Tony stopped and stared at him for a long moment. Steve started to wonder if Tony had lost his mind from sleep deprivation. Maybe making them walk back to Stark Tower hadn’t been a good idea after all.

“So...” Tony managed finally. “You’re saying, you thought some random stranger, who had thrown up in the bushes outside of your school, and accused you of stealing his cell phone, just randomly sent you flowers, and you, what, wanted to thank him? Thank *me*? Because, why? It’s the right thing to do? Is that what you’re saying to me right now?”

“Um,” Steve said. “Yes? I mean, yes.”

“Get the fuck out,” Tony said. “You’re not real right now. Fuck off.”

Steve crossed his arms over his chest. “Why is that so hard to believe?”

“Um, maybe because *no one is like that*, Rogers. You’re a freak of nature.”

Steve rolled his eyes, only feeling slightly offended. “I don’t believe you.”

“Excuse me?”

“I don’t believe you,” Steve repeated. “People are good, people do the right thing.” Tony opened his mouth to object, but Steve held out his hand. “For crying out loud, just look at yourself, Tony! You don’t have to put on a giant metal suit of armour, and fight bad guys, but you do.”

“Well, that’s kind of not the point at all,” he said.

“It is the point,” Steve insisted. “It’s exactly the point. You’re doing good in the world, not because anyone is making you, but because it’s the right thing to do. That’s all I want to do.”

“That’s not why I’m doing it,” Tony said, voice low.

“Then why?” Steve asked.

Tony shook his head but didn’t say anything.

“See?” Steve asked. “That is why. And you could be doing more, Tony. You could be doing so much more. You have all these resources, and people look up to you, and respect you, as Tony Stark and as Iron Man, and that’s an amazing privilege and responsibility.”

“I know what it is,” Tony said.

“You have a responsibility to the community,” Steve said. “You could be helping people.”

“I *am* helping people. Iron Man, remember?”

“I know,” Steve said. “I know. I just mean, there’s more you could do, not just against villains, but for people, real people in the city who need help. That’s all I mean.”

Tony stared at him.

Steve started to feel embarrassed. “Sorry,” he said after a moment. “I have a tendency to soapbox if no one stops me. Obviously, you don’t need me to tell you what to do.”

Tony was still staring.

“I should... probably be going,” he said, lamely. “Thanks for the flowers. Again. And for dinner.”

“Yeah,” Tony said.

Steve waved awkwardly, before turning and making his way towards the subway. That likely could have gone better, he scolded himself. All he had wanted to do was to thank Tony for the flowers, he hadn’t meant to insult the man, or presume to tell him, a *superhero*, what to do with his life. Steve squeezed his eyes shut, and counted to ten.

Oh well, he supposed. He looked stupid in front of a superhero. There were worse things that could happen.

-

It was three weeks later when Steve saw Tony again. Enough time to almost completely put their two previous encounters out of his head.

For that reason, Steve found himself shocked to stumble upon Tony Stark leaning casually against Bethany's desk. He shook his head, wondering if he was hallucinating, but when he looked again Tony was still standing there, smiling and flirting with her as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Steve stared for another moment, before Bethany noticed him awkwardly lurking in the doorway. "Steve," she said with a smile. "Your friend is here."

Tony turned around to face him, smirking. "Steve," he said. "Hey."

"Hi Tony," Steve said slowly, drawing the words out. "What are you doing here?"

Tony grinned, and shoved his hands into his pockets. "I'm volunteering," he said. "Isn't that what you said I should do? Give back to the community? Make a difference?"

"Uh," Steve said. He felt like his brain was moving through molasses. Nothing was making sense. "Yes. That's true. But I didn't mean..."

"Now, now, Steve," Tony said, talking over him. "That's what you said, right? It's about enriching the community and myself. Making a difference. Helping people. And that is what I am here to do. I am all about personal and community-al... communal? whatever, enrichment. I'm an enricher. They practically call me the enricher that's how much I am into enrichment." He paused. "Is it just me or has the word enrichment lost all meaning?"

He looked at Steve expectantly. "Um," Steve said again helpfully.

"Okay," Tony said, and clapped his hands once. "Chop, chop, Rogers. Let's get volunteering."

"You realise I work here, right?" Steve asked, finally getting his brain to work. "I'm not here for fun, this is my job."

Tony rolled his eyes. "I'm not here for fun *either*, Steve," he said, and Steve could tell he was trying to sound serious, but his eyes were dancing. "This is work, I get it. Very serious. A big deal, et cetera."

Steve resisted the urge to drop his face into his hands. "Okay," he said. "Um," he looked to Bethany for help, she just shrugged.

Usually when people came to the school to volunteer they were parents of the students, and would either help out in the class, help to cover lunch or recess for the staff. Steve took half a

second to imagine Tony supervising children, and although he barely knew the man, he could not see that ending well.

“Did you have an idea of what you wanted to do while you were here?” Steve asked finally.

Tony shrugged. “Enrich the lives of children.”

Steve stared at him. “That is entirely unhelpful--” he cut himself off. “No wait. That’s perfect. Follow me.”

“Wait--are you serious?”

Steve crossed his arms over his chest. “I am if you are, Tony,” he said simply before turning and making his way down the hall.

After a moment he heard Tony following him.

“So,” Steve said when they came to a stop outside of a door. “I think you’ll do well here.”

“Where’s... here?” Tony asked. For all his earlier bravado, he actually sounded a little nervous. Steve smiled and opened the door.

“Shop class.”

-

Steve left Tony with Greg, the shop teacher with a promise he would be back after his morning class. Tony watched him go with a bit of a desperate look. As Steve was walking out, he could hear Greg promising to show Tony around. Steve took one last look, and watched as Tony set his shoulders, determined. Steve smiled to himself.

A little over three hours later, he found himself sneaking back into the shop class. Not purposefully sneaking, he had knocked and waited for a response for several minutes. When one was not forthcoming, he peeked his head in the door.

The entire class was grouped together at the far end of the room, and Steve could just see some of Tony’s curly hair poking out from the middle of the swarm of students. Every so often he could hear an animated word from Tony, but the overall thread of conversation was lost in the surrounding hum of the class.

Steve sidled up next to Greg. “How’s everything going?” he asked.

Greg chuckled, looking dazed and amused. “Well, it’s not everyday I have Tony Stark in my classroom, that’s for sure.” He shook his head again, as if trying to clear the disbelief. “Half the stuff he showed the kids today shouldn’t even be *possible* with the materials we have here. It’s... it’s unreal.”

Steve could relate. He chuckled almost helplessly. “Yeah,” he said.

The bell rang for lunch, and Greg’s students filed quickly, although probably not as orderly as he would have liked, out of the classroom. He made his way over to where Tony was still sitting at the bench, and Steve watched as they talked quietly for a few moments. They shook hands, and then Greg waived at Steve before heading out himself.

Steve leaned against the wall, and waited as Tony made his way over.

“You survived,” Steve remarked.

There was a quiet, open look on Tony’s face. One that was more honest and vulnerable than anything else Steve had seen from him.

“Um, yeah,” Tony said, and scratched the back of his head. “I did.”

Steve smiled hesitantly. “That’s great,” he said. “I’m glad.”

They were quiet, and Steve felt awkward. It was the kind of silence that stretched on, and try as he might, he couldn’t think of any words to fill it.

“Well, listen--” he started.

“I have to go,” Tony said, and--there was no other word for it--fled from the classroom.

Steve stared at the empty doorway until the next bell rang.

-

The rest of the day passed uneventfully, and Steve half-thought that would be the last he saw of Tony. Steve... really should have known better by this point.

Tony showed up at the school the next day. And the day after that. He showed up at Steve’s school almost every day for three weeks straight. The days he didn’t make it before the end of the school day, he would still show up while Steve was doing his prep for the next day, or notably, once before the school day began, looking tired and worn out, and carrying the largest cup of coffee Steve had ever seen.

“Hey,” Steve said when Tony walked into the class. “You’re here early.”

“Yeah,” Tony said around a yawn. “I have to go out of town for the weekend. I just wanted to stop by before I left.”

Steve felt something clench inside his chest at that. “Everything okay?” he asked, trying to ignore the feeling. “You look beat.”

Tony waived his hand dismissively. “Yeah, yeah, everything’s fine. I mean, it’s not I have a board meeting in Malibu I have to attend, and I actually haven’t been to bed yet, but I can sleep on the plane, I guess. Or not, Pepper’s probably going to make me run numbers with her, she’s a horrible slave driver, and she says I’m never prepared for these meetings.”

There was so much Steve could possibly say to that, yet his brain latched on to the last part. “Are you ever prepared for these meetings?” he asked.

Tony laughed, though he looked so tired Steve almost wanted to lead him down to the pile of blankets they kept for nap time, and just let him rest.

“Nah,” he said. “Never. I mean that’s why I *have* Pepper.”

Steve wasn’t sure how to respond to that. How did a person go about discussing business with a billionaire, superhero CEO? The teacher in him wanted to say that it was never acceptable to show up to a meeting unprepared, but even in his own mind Steve realised how ridiculous that would sound.

“You’re adorable,” Tony said. Steve frowned. “I mean, I can practically *hear* you holding back from scolding me right now. Just admit it, Rogers, you want to give me a stern talking to, don’t you.”

Steve laughed, and instead of answering he walked across the room and put his hand on Tony’s shoulder. “All right,” he said. “Be safe.”

Tony looked down at his arm where Steve was touching him, and Steve immediately stepped away. Tony smiled at him, but it was a little more forced, a little less open than it had been just moments ago.

“Me, safe?” he said. “That’s my personal life philosophy,” he said. “You know that.”

Steve laughed and shooed him out of the building.

So Tony came to volunteer a lot. A lot more than he should have been able to, given how busy his schedule must be. It wasn’t always at the same time, and it wasn’t always for very long, but he came. Steve had been shocked every time he did for about a week, then he was resigned and secretly a little pleased.

Tony would show up, and help out in shop class. Greg told Steve he was teaching them how to build an engine, which was well beyond the regular middle school shop curriculum, but the kids were all taking to it amazingly. And... Tony was great with the kids. Steve would sneak in to watch him whenever he had a free moment, just sitting on the sidelines and watching as Tony taught, and teased, and cajoled the kids into helping him, into *learning*. It was a style that not many people could effectively pull off, but Steve was quickly learning that when it came to Tony Stark, he was an expert in mastering that which most people could not do.

After school, or on Steve’s lunch hour the two of them would spend time together. Steve started bringing an extra sandwich for Tony because he quickly learned that more often than

not Tony simply wouldn't eat unless food was placed right in front of him. It was easier for Steve to share his own than to risk leaving the premises to eat, or trying to send Tony off on his own.

Instead, the two of them would eat Steve's homemade sandwiches, and talk. Or Tony would help when Steve had lunchroom duty. It was easy, companionable. Unexpected. If someone had asked Steve if he thought he'd be eating lunch with Tony Stark a month ago, he would have laughed in their face. In fact, he would have laughed in the face of anyone who suggested he'd be eating lunch with just plain Tony the guy who passed out drunk on the school's front lawn.

Once, on a day when Tony hadn't arrived to help out, Bethany knocked on his classroom door in the middle of story time, and poked her head in. "Mr. Rogers," she said, and he knew.

Slowly, and quietly so as not to alarm the kids, Steve put down the book and walked across the room to where she was standing just inside his door. He didn't take his eyes of the kids, but when he was close enough, Bethany started talking.

"Iron Man's on the news," she said.

Steve felt a sinking feeling in his stomach. "What do we know?" he asked.

"Not much," she said. "He's fighting... something right now."

Steve nodded and thanked her for letting him know. Then he calmly and quietly walked back to where he had been sitting just moments ago and resumed reading to his students.

There wasn't anything he could do.

Somehow, he made it through the day. He taught his classes and he ate his lunch, and he somehow made due with the tiny scraps of news he could gather in between all that.

When he got home at the end of the day he turned on the news and was *horrified*. Tony had spent the day fighting... some kind of creature. The news reports seemed to think it was a mutant whose powers had gotten out of control, and Steve supposed they would know better than him, but whatever it was Tony was fighting looked so much worse than any ordinary (or not so ordinary) mutant. The thing (person?) was huge, and it seemed to be able to shape its limbs into any form it chose, and what it chose was whatever was best for the maximum damage.

Steve heard, in a very detached way, the newscaster informing him that the following images would be violent, and that viewer discretion was advised, but he couldn't seem to hear anything over the rushing in his own ears. He watched, transfixed as Tony was slammed, smashed, and thrown into multiple hard surfaces repeatedly. He watched as Tony continued to get up, to fight back, until finally, the screen cut to images of the thing-mutant-person being led away by the authorities.

Steve couldn't look away from the battered Iron Man suit.

He had known--obviously he had known that Tony was Iron Man. He knew about Iron Man and the villains he had fought in the past. Steve knew that Tony was Iron Man, and that Iron Man fought bad guys. Yet he had somehow never put it together in his mind--not *really*--that his friend Tony was the same Tony who risked his life to fight crime.

They had always, besides that one time at the very beginning when Steve went to Stark Industries, met on Steve's terms. In Steve's *space*. While rationally Steve knew that Tony was Iron Man and that Iron Man fought crime, he had never really thought about the real world applications. He hadn't really thought about what it meant for *Tony*.

Seeing Tony thrown around, even though he was in the suit, even though Steve knew the suit kept him safe, had been hard. Really hard. Harder than Steve could have ever imagined or anticipated it being. When he took a moment to think about *why* it was so difficult, it hit him like a ton of bricks.

Steve cared about Tony. As more than a colleague or acquaintance. As more than a friend, even.

He cared about him a lot.

Sleep was a long time coming that night.

-

Tony showed up at the school bright and early the next morning. He was there, leaning against Bethany's desk before Steve even walked into the office. He turned when Steve entered, smiled at him, and Steve felt his breath catch.

There was a butterfly bandage across his left eyebrow, where the skin had obviously been split, and though Steve couldn't see any bruising, he suspected it was there, covered by makeup and clothes. He wanted to cross the room and put his hands on Tony, *make sure* he was all right. Reassure himself that Tony was really standing there in front of him, if not perfectly okay, then at least whole.

"Miss me?" Tony asked with a smirk.

Steve shook his head. "Why?" he asked. "Were you gone?"

Tony laughed outright at that.

The morning passed normally enough. If Steve couldn't stop his mind from wandering to Tony every couple of minutes, well his students were only five, he doubted very much that they'd even notice.

At lunch, Tony came and found him as normal. Steve wordlessly passed him a sandwich, and the two of them ate in silence for several long minutes.

“So,” Tony said after wolfing down his meal. “Where’s the commentary?” he asked.

Steve looked at him. “Commentary?”

“Yeah.” He made a talking gesture with his hands and rolled his eyes a little. “You know, the commentary about me being safe, taking risks et cetera et cetera.”

Steve stared at him. “I don’t understand,” he said slowly.

Tony scoffed outright at that. “Oh please,” he said. “Everyone has commentary.” He raised the pitch of his voice. “‘Tony you’re not being careful enough,’ or ‘Tony you’re taking unnecessary risks.’”

“Are you?”

“What?”

“Are you taking unnecessary risks? Not being careful?”

Tony stared at him. “That’s not the point!”

Steve shook his head. “What’s the point?”

“The point--” he cut off. “The *point*, is that *I’m* the one in the suit, *I’m* the one in the life threatening situation, and *I’m* the one who has to make the judgement call in the heat of the moment.”

“I know that,” Steve said calmly.

“What?” Steve could see the moment the momentum was cut out from the arguments Tony had clearly been building up for a long time.

“I know that,” he repeated. “I never said you weren’t.”

Tony boggled at him, but didn’t say anything.

Steve sighed. “Do I wish I didn’t have to see you in danger? Of course. *Of course* I don’t like seeing you in danger, Tony. I’m not thrilled to hear you’re not being careful and taking unnecessary risks either, but like you said, *that’s your call*. You’re the superhero, not me. I knew that about you when we first met. Well not when we *first* met, but I knew that about you from the beginning, Tony. I’m not going to presume to tell you how to live your life, or how to be a hero when I don’t know the first thing about that. I trust you.”

Tony stared at him for what felt like ages, and then angrily got to his feet. “Well,” he said. “That’s your first mistake.”

He stalked out.

-

Steve didn't see him for two days after that, and when he appeared suddenly in the afternoon on the third day looking like he very much did not want to talk about it, Steve decided he could stand to pretend some of what he said never happened.

Tony looked relieved, and Steve tried to tell himself he wasn't disappointed that he wasn't forced to talk about the things he had said and what they meant.

Instead, he snuck into the shop class while his kindergarteners were spending some time in the library, and watched Tony interact with a bunch of surly preteens.

-

"How do you have time for this?" Steve asked.

It was early into the fifth week of Tony showing up at the school to volunteer. It was the end of the day and Steve was cleaning up the mess his kids left and preparing for the next day. No matter how many times you sang the clean up song to five year olds, they just didn't really get the job done.

Tony was sitting on one of the tiny chairs at the block station, aimlessly stacking blocks on top of each other. He looked at Steve, and not for the first time Steve had no idea what was going through Tony's head. He thought that Tony probably enjoyed being here, helping... whatever else he could say about Tony Stark, he wasn't a person that did things he didn't want to do. But as much as Steve *knew* no one was forcing Tony to be there--that *Steve* wasn't forcing him to be here--he couldn't reconcile Tony's presence near daily with that first conversation they had had. Or the second. It didn't make sense.

"What?" Tony asked.

"How do you have time for this?" Steve repeated. "I just thought--what with the running your own company and being a superhero... doesn't this take up a lot of time you don't really have?"

Tony looked down at the block he was holding, and for a long time he didn't say anything. Steve almost thought he was going to ignore the question.

"That's the thing about running your own company, Steve. You can do whatever the fuck you want and no one can really stop you. Except Pepper. Well, not even really Pepper, though she does try to stop me a lot of the time, and I do sometimes feel bad when I don't do what she says. Sorta. Maybe a little. I'm the boss. I can do what I want. But if you don't want me here, that's fine. That's all you had to say. You're right there are a lot of other people that would enjoy my time. *Pay* for it even."

He stood and started putting on his jacket. Steve stared at him, and it wasn't until Tony was almost out his classroom door that he was able to find his words.

"Tony, stop," he called. "That wasn't what I was saying at all. I'm happy you're here. The kids love you, you're doing so much for them."

"The kids," Tony snorted. "Right, of course."

It was clearly the wrong thing to have said, but Steve didn't fully understand why. "I just meant--" He broke off and ran his hand through his hair. "I just meant you're a busy person. *Obviously.* And an important one. And I think it's great that you're here helping out. I mean I guess it was my idea to begin." Tony snorted at that. "But you're right, there are a lot of people that are willing to pay for your time, and when I suggested you should give back to the community I didn't mean..." he trailed off, unsure how to end.

"I see," Tony said, sounding clipped.

Steve knew he was only making it worse, but he didn't know what he meant, not exactly. Or, he knew what he meant, but he didn't know how to express it.

"Everything is coming out wrong," Steve tried.

"Well then, Rogers, why don't you explain it to me."

"I'm trying!"

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and looked down his nose at Steve, a clear 'I'm waiting' expression.

"I just--the kids love having you here, Tony, I'm not saying that they don't. They love you. You're amazing with them, and I know I gave you a hard time in the beginning and that's probably the only reason you're here, or I don't know. I just wouldn't want to take up your time, you know?"

Tony stared at him.

"I don't get you, Rogers," he said after a long moment.

Steve shrugged helplessly.

"If you don't want me to come here anymore, just say so," Tony said.

"It's not that that I don't want you here, Tony," Steve tried again.

"Right," Tony nodded. "You want me here for the kids, right?"

"Yes, exactly. I mean, only if you want to be."

"Right," Tony said. "I understand." He turned and walked out of the class.

-

Tony didn't show up the next day. Or the day after that. In fact, Steve didn't see Tony for a whole week after their fight in his class. It frustrated him. He felt like he should call and explain (like that had gone so well last time), or apologize, except he wasn't sure what exactly he had to be sorry for. All he had been trying to do was be conscientious of Tony's time. His *valuable* time. He'd obviously done a terrible job explaining that, but he had good intentions.

A lot of good that had done him.

The worst part was Steve *missed* Tony. Things would happen during his day, stupid, inconsequential things, and Steve found himself thinking, *I'll have to tell Tony*, only to suddenly realise that Tony wasn't there.

Bethany and Greg both asked him where Tony had gone, and Steve had to shrug uselessly every time.

After seven days of no word, Steve called Tony. No answer. He called again, and then again when there was no answer. By the time the tenth day rolled around and Steve *still* didn't have a response, his options were either going to track Tony down, or forgetting about him all together.

"Feels like deja vu," he mumbled to himself, as he walked up to the front doors of the Stark Industries building.

Once inside the doors, he hesitated. The chances of just stumbling into Ms Potts like he had the last time were incredibly slim to none, and Steve highly doubted anyone in security would believe him if he said he was there to see Tony Stark.

He paced back and force across the lobby a few times, silently cursing himself for thinking he could just show up at Tony's building and work things out. Tony obviously didn't want to talk to him, or he would have returned one of Steve's numerous phone calls, or come back to the school.

Steve didn't know why he couldn't just let it go. Or rather, he did know. He had known for a while, since before Tony got hurt in his last fight as Iron Man, and even before that, when he couldn't forget about the strange man who sent him flowers for no discernible reason. He'd known all along, and pretending otherwise was just lying to himself.

Just as he was lying to himself now, thinking that what happened between them meant more than it did. Tony was rich, and smart, and he didn't need to volunteer, and he didn't need Steve. He had probably just been bored, or doing it for the publicity, or--

Steve had to stop himself. He knew Tony wasn't just doing it for the press. Steve had seen Tony interact with the students enough time to know that, and even just thinking it was unfair and uncharitable of him. Tony was, well, he was amazing, he just had better things to do than hang out with Steve.

His mind made up, Steve turned on his heel, and made walked towards the exit.

He was stopped not five feet from the door by a firm hand coming down on his shoulder, and when he turned around he came face to face with the man himself. Tony was wearing navy dress pants, and a white collared shirt under a blue vest. His sleeves were rolled up to his elbows, and the grey tie he was wearing was slightly askew.

"Steve," he said, his voice flat. "What are you doing here?"

Staring at Tony, Steve's mouth was suddenly dry, and he found himself wondering how he had ever considered anything between the two of them as just friendship. Tony was gorgeous, and Steve found himself struck by it even more now than ever.

"I... came to find you," he said hesitantly.

Tony crossed his arms over his chest and arched an eyebrow. "And you thought you'd do that by leaving my building?"

Steve sighed in frustration, and rubbed his hands back and forth through his hair a few times, as if the motion would get his nerves out. Release the tight knot that had been sitting in the pit of his stomach since their fight over a week and a half ago. It did not.

"No," he said. "I was leaving, I guess. I mean you obviously didn't want to see me, and I just..." he trailed off.

Tony stared at him. "*I* obviously didn't want to see you? Me? Are you for real right now?" he sounded angry and upset, and suddenly, Steve just snapped.

"Yeah, Tony. You. What was I supposed to think? You stopped coming around, you don't answer any of my calls, that's a real good sign you want me around. Silly me, what was I thinking?"

"That's rich, Rogers, coming from you."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"What is it supposed to *mean*?" Tony shouted.

At that moment, Ms Potts appeared at their side, a stern look on her face. "What have I said, Tony? What have I said about getting into shouting matches in public?"

"We're not in public," Tony huffed. "This is my building. I own this building. This building is very much *my own property*."

“Yes well,” Pepper put her hand on Tony’s back, and curled the other one around Steve’s elbow, and ushered them both into a private elevator. “You may own the building, but the first floor is definitely public domain, so you two can just continue this shouting match in your workshop.”

The three of them rode in silence, and when the doors dinged open, Pepper put her hand on the Tony’s back and shoved. She looked like she wanted to do the same for Steve, so he followed Tony without prompting.

Steve glanced around the room quickly. Tony’s workshop was fascinating. Steve had thought so the last time he had been there, and he thought so now. He would have liked the chance to take a more thorough look, but he was too angry right now to concentrate on anything other than the sound of his own harsh breathing.

“Well?” Tony demanded, spreading his arms.

“Well *what*?” Steve asked. “What do you want from me, Tony? You’re the one who stopped coming around, you’re the one who never called me back, you’re the one--”

“You’re the one who kept going on and on about how great it was I was doing it for the *kids* and how much the *kids* enjoyed it!”

“Well it is! And they do!”

“And that’s it?” Tony asked.

Steve let out a long grunt. “I don’t know what else you want me to say, Tony!”

“What about *you*?” he asked.

“What *about* me?”

“Did you even care that I was around? You never acted like you did! You never said anything after my last battle! You never wanted to do anything besides the volunteering. Frankly, Rogers, I’m surprised that you noticed when I stopped showing up.”

Steve stared at him. He watched Tony’s chest rise and fall, and he tried to process Tony’s words. Tried to make sense of them. But he couldn’t. Nothing made sense.

“You,” Steve finally tried. “You are the stupidest, most *frustrating* person I have ever met!” he finally shot back.

“Likewise,” Tony said.

“Are you--Tony, I can’t believe you. You thought, what? That I made you lunch, and spent my breaks with you, and spent time after class, and, and, what? You thought I did all that because I didn’t *care*?”

Tony crossed his arms but didn’t say anything.

“I didn’t ask about your battle because you glared at me like you were practically *daring* me to even think about mentioning it! And I didn’t think it was any of my business! You’re a goddamn superhero, Tony! And who am I? I’m nobody! I didn’t ask you to spend time with me outside of school because you’re a CEO and you have a company to run! I’m a kindergarten teacher, Tony! I can’t ask you to give up your responsibilities for me, I can’t ask that, and I never will.”

Steve stopped talking. Tony didn’t say anything. They stared at each other in silence for a long time.

“If you thought I didn’t care, or that I wouldn’t notice when you stopped coming around, you were wrong,” Steve finally said when it seemed like Tony wouldn’t say anything else. “I’m going to go,” he said, and turned to leave.

“Wait,” Tony said finally, and Steve turned around. “I’m terrible at this,” he said simply, taking two steps across the room. Then his hands were on Steve’s neck, pulling him down, kissing him, licking his lips open, hot and wet and dirty.

Steve groaned. His hands settled firmly on Tony’s hips, pulling their bodies closer together, and Steve felt his breath hitch in his chest when Tony let out a low moan. Tony’s arms were wrapped around Steve’s neck, and Steve stumbled back several feet until he crashed into one of Tony’s tables. He let out a muffled curse that Tony quickly swallowed up, biting on Steve’s lower lip, and then sucking on his tongue.

Steve moaned and pulled their hips together. He was half hard already, and he could feel Tony hard against his thigh too. He pushed up against Tony’s body trying to get any sort of friction between them, and Tony broke away from their kiss to bite and lick at Steve’s neck. Steve gasped.

“Tony,” he said. “Wait, wait,” he trailed off when Tony’s hands moved from his neck down to Steve’s sides, pushing his shirt up and out of the way. Then his hands were on Steve’s bare skin, hot and rough, and Steve lifted his arms. Tony threw his shirt across the room. Steve didn’t bother to pay attention to where it went.

Steve found the buttons on Tony’s vest, and undid them quickly. Or as quick as he could with Tony’s hands and mouth on his chest and collar bone.

“Goddamn, Rogers,” Tony said, as Steve pushed the vest down and off his shoulders. “Your chest is a work of art. I would know because Pepper keeps making me buy a lot of it.”

Steve chuckled, still struggling with Tony’s tie and shirt. “Why are you wearing so many layers?” he asked.

Tony took his hands off Steve, and made quick work of his tie, before getting frustrated himself and pulling his shirt up and over his head, not bothering with any of the buttons. Steve laughed.

Then they were kissing again, chests pressed tightly together and Steve ran his hands up and down Tony’s spine, enjoying the feel of bare skin against his palms, and savouring the way

Tony shivered.

“There’s a couch over in the corner,” Tony mumbled against Steve’s lips between kisses, and the two of them somehow managed to make their way across the room without tripping.

Tony pushed Steve down against the soft cushions, and then next thing he knew, he found himself with a lapful of Tony Stark. Steve grinned up at him, digging his fingers into Tony’s hair and pulling him down for another kiss.

Things moved so quickly, Steve had trouble keeping track. Tony reached between them and undid Steve’s belt and pants. Steve bit back a moan as Tony’s fingers brushed across his dick, and couldn’t help arching up for more contact.

“Yeah,” Tony mumbled. “Yeah, yeah, Steve, yeah, you feel so good.”

He kept talking the entire time. Steve kept turning his head to catch Tony’s mouth in a kiss, but even then Tony would let out words and phrases, soft sounds against Steve’s mouth. Steve nudged at his hips, and Tony sat up a little until Steve could get his pants undone and pushed down. He struggled with his own clothes until finally they were touching, their cocks rubbing up against each other, slick with precome and sweat. Steve could hardly move to get any sort of rhythm going between the two of them, tangled up in their clothes as he was.

Tony held his palm up to Steve’s mouth. Steve wrapped his fingers around his wrist before licking a long, wet stripe twice across his hand, and sucked Tony’s thumb into his mouth. He circled his tongue around the digit and sucked, watching as Tony bared his neck, writhing and gasping in his lap.

“Tony,” he muttered. “Come on, come *on*, touch me, please.”

Tony didn’t need to be told twice, he pulled his hand away from Steve’s mouth and grabbed both their dicks in his hand stroking fast and hard, before thumbing the underside of Steve’s cock. Steve jerked forward. He put his mouth against Tony’s neck, and just breathed against his skin, hot and wet.

“Steve,” Tony urged him on. “Yeah, baby, yeah, you’re so good, Steve, you’re so *good*,” and that was it, Steve was jerking and gasping, and *coming* hard and fast and wet. Tony stroked them both through Steve’s orgasm, and he could feel, distantly the rush of Tony’s come as he came too, moments after.

They slumped together, just breathing, and Steve could hear his heartbeat pounding in his ears, feel it beating in his skin. He ran his hands up and down Tony’s back.

“Ugh,” Tony said after several minutes. “We’re sticky. Dum-E get over here with a cloth, would you. Make yourself useful for a change.”

Steve had a brief moment to wonder who he was talking to, before he was greeted by a large robot arm with a washcloth.

It was definitely one of the stranger moments in his life.

After they wipe themselves down, and pull their pants back on, Steve slumped back on the couch, and Tony settled in next to them. It was quiet, but not awkward. Steve knew once they started talking things were bound to get confusing and complicated again, but for just right now he felt happy and satisfied. He put his hand on Tony's knee and squeezed.

In retrospect, Steve would recognize it as the moment where everything went wrong.

He felt Tony's posture stiffen beside him, and when turned his head to look over, Tony's expression was pinched and uncomfortable looking.

"What's... wrong?" Steve asked, the good feeling he had been experiencing only moments earlier completely evaporated.

"Nothing," Tony said, and Steve recognized the smile on his face. It was the same smile he had seen in countless publicity shots.

"O-kay," Steve said hesitantly. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah," Tony said. "Perfectly." He stood and walked to the other end of the workshop, leaving Steve alone on the couch.

Steve sat in silence for several long moments while Tony worked on something unseen on his workbench. He opened and closed his mouth a couple times, searching for something to say, but each time he came up blank.

The line of Tony's back was rigid, and when he finally did turn around to face Steve, his shoulders were squared.

"I think you should probably go," he said.

"What?" Steve asked, staring at him with what had to be a slack jawed expression. He just could not put together the Tony who was staring at him now with a detached expression, with the Tony who had been kissing and touching him ten minutes earlier.

"You should go," Tony repeated.

Steve stood, looking around the room for his shirt. He spotted it dangling from one of Tony's many contraptions, and went to fetch it. Tony was still in just his pants, but Steve felt like the added clothing was necessary for this conversation.

"What the hell, Tony?" he asked, still unable to fully process what was going on.

Tony stared at him, his arms crossed casually over his chest. There was a brief flicker of--something in his eyes before they went cold.

"We were just--" he felt his body flush hot with embarrassment and anger. "And now you're telling me to leave? Just like that?"

"Seems so," Tony said. His voice sounded casual, but his body was wound tight with tension.

“No,” Steve said. “Tony, what the hell. What about before?” he asked.

“What about it?” Tony said. “We had sex, Steve. We had sex because, whatever, that’s what I do. It doesn’t mean anything. It never does with me, haven’t you heard?”

“Tony,” Steve started. “This isn’t you. You don’t mean that.” His chest felt tight, and his skin was still hot. He didn’t know why Tony was saying these things, but Steve knew it wasn’t because he meant them. He ran his hand through his hair, beyond frustrated. He thought they had sorted things out before, but maybe they hadn’t. Maybe he had just been too caught up in his own emotions and lust for Tony, and he had rushed them both into something they weren’t ready for.

“I said what I meant,” Tony said.

“Look,” Steve tried. “If I rushed you into doing something you didn’t want...”

Tony laughed, and the sound was bitter, and harsh. Steve felt it like a shock of electricity.

“Don’t you know?” Tony asked. “I’m always ready for sex. That’s all this was,” he said. “Sex. It meant nothing.”

Steve jerked back. He felt a rush of blinding hot rage run through him. “You’re a fucking liar, and a coward,” he said.

Tony smiled and shrugged. “That’s true. Now, I said you should leave, and I meant it. Get out.”

Steve squared his shoulders. “Fine, I will,” he said. “But when I do, I’m not coming back, Tony. Don’t bother calling me either.”

“Don’t worry,” Tony said, his voice dripping nonchalance. “I won’t.”

Steve turned and walked out, and didn’t look back.

His anger lasted him all the way through the building, and out onto the street. There, standing in the middle of bustling New York City, Steve felt it deflate out of him in a rush. His body felt empty and cold, and he wished desperately he could go back to that moment with the two of them sitting quietly, side by side on Tony’s couch when everything felt like a bright beginning.

Instead, it was the end.

-

The rest of the school year passed, and Tony, true to his word, never called. Steve wondered often how his life had taken this turn. How his daily jog, one early morning in April led to

him to this moment where he was unhappy, alone, and more than a little heartbroken.

He thought often about calling Tony, and apologizing, or demanding an apology, or at the very least, an explanation. He even went as far as dialing Tony's number one one or two occasions, but he could never bring himself to complete the call.

It wouldn't do any good, he told himself. It wasn't as if Tony ever answered his phone.

Every day that brought him closer and closer to the end of the school year forced Steve to accept the fact that he really would never see Tony again. He tried to tell himself it was for the best.

It was no use lying to himself.

Steve spent time with his students, prepared end of the year events at the school, finished all of his report cards, and accepted the trinkets, silly gifts, and touching cards his kids gave him on the last day, and tried not to think about how much he would miss all of them next year. Tried not to think about how his summer was stretching empty and bleak ahead of him, and how when he did come back to school in September, Tony wouldn't be there either.

-

Three weeks into July Steve was getting lunch at his favourite deli. The summer break had been passing slowly, and aimlessly. Steve, normally so good at keeping himself busy without work, had found himself at a bit of a loss.

He could admit to himself it had everything to do with Tony.

Steve placed his order with the girl behind the counter, and stepped aside to wait for his sandwich. There was a television playing quietly in the background, and Steve was idly watching some daytime talkshow, when the coverage switched to a news broadcast.

Steve glanced away, and when he looked back, there was a reporter standing in the middle of 5th Avenue, civilians running for cover behind her as Iron Man battled with... Steve wasn't sure who or what Iron Man was facing, but Tony was shooting repulsor blasts, and dodging return fire like his life depending on that.

"Can you--" Steve coughed when his voice got caught in his throat. "Excuse me, miss," he said. "Can you turn the volume up?"

She turned around from where she was making his food, and immediately reached for the remote once she saw what was on TV. Suddenly, they weren't the only ones glued to the broadcast, all the other patrons were watching with a sort of fascinated horror as Tony battled, once again, for the safety of the city and his own life.

Watching Iron Man, everything Steve had felt for Tony over the last months, everything he had been trying to repress and deny since their fight, everything he had attempted to convince himself wasn't real, came rushing back. He felt faint. He felt like he was going to be sick.

"Are you okay?" the server asked.

Steve shook his head. "No," he said. "No, I don't think so."

Steve and the other patrons continued to watch Iron Man fight, and struggle. It was obvious to Steve, and the reporter covering the battle, and anyone with eyes that it wasn't going well.

Iron Man was holding his ground, but barely just. Tony continued to dodge and duck and blast apart large chunks of debris his opponent threw his way (large pieces of 5th Ave, Steve realised belatedly). He was holding his ground, and keeping the villain from attacking civilians, but he wasn't gaining. He wasn't going to be able to defeat him.

Steve wasn't sure how long he and the others stood there watching. It felt like hours, days. He could barely keep track of all the fighting Iron Man was doing, and he spared a moment to wonder at the camera man keeping up with the action, and staying close enough to capture everything. He was thankful for that. He knew he would have gone out of his mind if he wasn't able to see that Tony was all right with his own eyes.

Then suddenly, Tony *wasn't* all right. He was sprawled out across the pavement, and he wasn't moving. Steve felt lightheaded, and only then did he remember to breathe.

Iron Man rose slowly, and shakily got to his feet. It was so quiet in the deli, Steve was sure everyone else was holding their breath right along with him.

He wasn't sure what happened after that. He saw Iron Man lift a large chunk of debris off the ground and hurl it towards the supervillain. He saw the repulsor in Tony's chest (his arc reactor, he realised) pulse brighter, and then a bright stream burst forth from his chest, and everything seemed to explode.

The camera dropped to the ground, and all Steve could see was part of the road. Everything was dark compared to the blinding light moments earlier, and he could hear the reporter coughing in the background, and asking her cameraman if he was okay. More voices, and then the camera being lifted off the ground, and scanning the street for signs of moment.

There wasn't any.

The camera continued to roll until it settled on, then zoomed in close to a pile of red and gold metal. A gasp tore through the deli as Steve and everyone else present realised what they were looking at.

"Iron Man is down."

Steve heard the voice of the reporter as if it were coming from a very far distance.

They all continued to watch with muted horror as paramedics and police officers, and swat, and a bunch of men and women in dark suits swarmed the scene. Steve stared helplessly at

the screen as Tony was lifted onto a stretcher and hurried into an ambulance and away from the scene.

He listened to the news anchors report on the horrific events, his feet rooted to the ground, unable to move, unable to take anything in or accept that this was real and really happening. Tony could be anywhere right now, and Steve had no way of getting to him. Worse yet, he had no right to.

Steve's feet didn't seem to agree with his brain, however, because when he heard them announce on the news that which hospital Tony was being taken to, he was moving before he even realised it.

Almost an hour later, Steve made his way into the emergency room, with zero plan on what he was going to do, or how he was going to locate Tony. He knew he had almost no chance of finding him in all the chaos, and even if he did, it was unlikely anyone would actually allow him to see Tony, or that Tony would even *want* to see him. He had been the one to kick Steve out all those weeks ago, after all.

Still, Steve couldn't bring himself to care about that, or anything else. All he knew was he had to find Tony, had to find out if he was okay. That was all that mattered.

Eventually, he just followed the commotion, and what with everyone running around trying to see to the injured, no one bothered to ask Steve who he was or if he had the authority to be there. He was glad, because he wasn't sure what he would have done if someone had tried to stop him. Probably nothing pleasant.

As he moved through the crowds, he finally heard a familiar voice, and barreled through until he was hovering outside a private room. He could hear Tony arguing with someone inside; maybe Pepper, or his doctor. Maybe both.

Steve wanted to rush in, wanted to throw himself at Tony and make sure he was really okay. He wanted to put his hands all over Tony's body and check for himself that he was breathing, that he was alive, that nothing had happened.

He couldn't. His feet, which had been on autopilot since he left the deli had abandoned him. He was standing stock still outside Tony's hospital room, listening in on a conversation he had no right to hear. He realised how inappropriate it was that he had come here. Tony didn't want him here. Tony had said as much himself the last time they had spoken, and Steve needed to respect Tony's wishes.

And he would. Now that he knew Tony was okay, Steve could leave and try to forget about Tony for real this time. Try to move on.

He shook himself out of his stupor, and took a deep breath. Before he could make himself move, Pepper suddenly appeared in the doorway.

"Steve!" she exclaimed.

Steve winced.

“Steve?” He could hear Tony’s voice coming from inside the room, and he cringed again. So much for that plan.

“I saw--the news,” Steve said.

Pepper nodded, but didn’t say anything else.

“Pepper!” Again, Tony’s voice rang out from inside the room, and Steve knew if he took two steps to his left he would be standing in the open doorway, that he could see for himself that Tony was really alive and whole for himself, that he could reassure himself that everything was okay.

“I should--go,” he said instead. “I didn’t mean to intrude. It was rude of me to come here uninvited. Please tell Tony I’m sorry.”

He really did turn to leave this time, except before he took his first step, Pepper’s hand shot out and grabbed his wrist in an iron grip. “Oh no you don’t, Rogers,” she said.

Steve stared down at her delicate hand holding his wrist, then glanced up and met her eyes, before looking down again to see that yes, she really was holding on to him. She took several quick steps, and Steve had no choice but to follow pathetically behind as she dragged him to Tony’s beside. Internally, he sighed. There was no escaping the humiliation now.

“Talk,” Pepper said.

Steve opened his mouth to explain what he was doing at there, but before he got two words out Tony interrupted.

“Aw, Pep, come on,” he said.

Pepper glared. “You are going to talk to each other, or so help me god, Anthony Stark I will do some very unpleasant things to items and body parts you hold very dear.” Tony actually gulped visibly.

Steve took a moment to glance at Tony out of the corner of his eye. There was a purple bruise blossoming along his temple and down over his left eye. Steve could make out the edge of another bruise on his collarbone, barely obstructed by the collar of Tony’s shirt. He couldn’t see anything else, but he had no doubt Tony’s torso would be spotted with colour.

There was a small smile playing itself out on Tony’s lips, and it wasn’t until Steve saw it that he truly allowed himself to let go of the fear he had been holding onto for what felt like days.

“That goes for you too, Mr. Rogers,” she said, and stormed out in a huff. Tony’s doctor followed behind without having said a word.

Steve turned back to face Tony, and the look in his eyes was the same one he had seen the last time they had been together. Steve remembered their fight in a rush, and it was almost enough to make him wish he hadn’t come. Or at least that he hadn’t been caught.

“So,” Tony said. “Let me guess: you were in the neighbourhood.”

“No,” Steve said with a shrug. “Not at all.”

“So what,” Tony asked, crossing his arms and visibly wincing as the action pulled at his injuries. “You were worried?” There was an edge of a sneer to his words, and Steve tried not to visibly wince.

“Yes,” he said seriously. “I was.”

Tony stared at him.

“But, I shouldn’t have come,” Steve continued when Tony didn’t say anything else. “You made your feelings perfectly clear--before. I’m sorry I didn’t respect that. I was just--I’m not sure why I came.”

“Oh,” Tony said.

Steve turned to leave, then stopped. “No,” he said. “No, you know what. I do know why I came. I came because I was scared out of my mind for you, Tony, and I needed to see that you were okay. I know you don’t feel the same way as I do, and that’s,” he swallowed around the sudden lump in his throat. “That’s fine. But I won’t apologise for coming here, and I won’t apologise for caring about you.”

Tony opened his mouth, but no words came out.

“Okay,” Steve said, and then again, “Okay. I’ll go now. I’m glad you’re okay, Tony.”

“I’m sorry,” he said sounding gutted. “I’m sorry, *okay*?”

Steve turned to face him. He felt hope rise up in him without his permission. Tony looked stricken, and Steve hated to see him looking that way. Hated that he might have had something to do with putting that look on Tony’s face.

“I panicked. That’s what I do, Steve. I’m a panicker, and I’m not good in relationships. Ask anyone. Hell, ask Pepper, she’ll give you some first hand knowledge. And I just. I didn’t want you to leave,” he said.

Steve couldn’t help the bitter chuckle that escaped. “You sure have a way of showing it,” he muttered. “What with telling me to leave numerous times.”

“I know,” Tony said. “I *know*, and I’m so fucking sorry, Steve. I really am. But you have to know that I’m not good enough for you. I’ll just fuck thing up between us. I already have.”

Steve shook his head. “No,” he said. Tony arched an eyebrow. “Well, maybe the second one, but you’re wrong about not being good enough for me. Tony, that’s ridiculous. Look at what you did today. Look at what you do everyday. You’re amazing. I’m just,” he trailed off. “I’m just me.”

Tony reached out his hand, and Steve stepped forward to take it. Tony tangled their fingers together, and tugged until Steve was standing at the edge of the bed, then tugged further until Steve was seated next to him.

“You’re amazing,” he said. “Steve, you’re probably the best person I know, and I’ll be honest with you, that scares me. I’m not sure what to do about the mess of things going on inside my chest, and I’m not just talking about this.” He knocked on the arc reactor. “It’s not like I want to fuck up, you know? I already told you that I panic, and when I panic I do dumb shit. And you haven’t even seen have the shit I get up to in my workshop when no one’s around to supervise me, I get in trouble, and I make stupid decisions, and I spend my money recklessly, and I do dangerous things, and I get hurt, and I fuck up, and I know that people can’t handle that--can’t handle *me*, and I--”

He broke off when Steve reached forward, placed his hands gently around Tony’s face and pulled him in for a kiss.

This was nothing like the last time. Steve moved his mouth slowly, gently against Tony’s, coaxing his lips apart, and licking into his mouth with a fierce but delicate determination. He wanted to show Tony how he felt. He hoped to convey everything he didn’t know how to say in one kiss, as if he could make everything okay, as if by kissing Tony he could convince him that he was good enough, and that together they could be so much more than that.

Steve pulled back eventually, and stroked his fingers gently down Tony’s neck, and then brushed the abused skin on his forehead. He smiled.

“You drive me crazy,” Steve said. “You the smartest, and the dumbest person I’ve ever met, and you make me absolutely crazy,” he said. “And I don’t mean to be rude, but I think from now on, you should let me decide what I can and can’t handle.” He kissed Tony again, briefly on the mouth. “I don’t tell you to stop taking crazy risks,” Steve continued, his gaze flickering over the bruise on his forehead, and clavicle. “Do me the same courtesy.”

Tony stared at him, dazed.

“But,” he said.

Steve shook his head, and placed one palm, gently but firmly over Tony’s mouth. He smiled and shook his head.

“No buts,” he said. “You just said you make dumb decisions, so I’m going to make this one for the both of us, if that’s okay. I want to try this, Tony.”

Tony opened his mouth against Steve’s hand, but he didn’t move. His words were muffled.

“Are you going to tell me to leave?” Steve asked.

Tony shook his head. Then he licked Steve’s palm. Steve made a face and jerked back. He stared down at his wet hand, before bringing it up to Tony’s face and wiping it on the uninjured cheek.

“You’re gross,” Tony said.

Steve rolled his eyes. “So, I can stay?” he said after a pause.

Tony hesitated for only a second before nodding. He pulled Steve down until the two of them were lying pressed together on the tiny hospital bed. It was cramped and uncomfortable, but Steve couldn't remember ever feeling happier. He wrapped his arm around Tony's waist, careful for anywhere he might be sore from the fight. Then he pressed his face into Tony's neck, kissed the warm delicate skin there, and settled in for the long haul.

"Yeah," Tony said. "You can stay."

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